Message

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Nonstick Chemicals Could Spur Landfill Investigations (1)

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- PFOA, PFOS found at New Hampshire Superfund site
- Poly-, perfluorinated compounds found contaminating drinking water across U.S.

A ubiquitous chemical found leaching from a New Hampshire landfill could indicate a costly problem on the horizon for waste sites around the country.

At the Coakley Landfill Superfund site in New Hampshire, a contractor has found two chemicals, known as per- and polyfluorinated compounds, that have also turned up in drinking water supplies across the country.

Depending on conditions at individual landfills, other waste sites that were once considered safe could be re-opened for further investigation and cleanup, an Environmental Protection Agency official said Oct. 17.

At the Coakley landfill, per- and polufluorinated compounds could be coming from the cap separating the waste from the outer environment, the pipes carrying water away from the waste, or the waste itself. The contaminating compounds are members of a family of hundreds used in the production of food wrappers, carpets, non-stick pans, raincoats, and other consumer goods.

The compounds may cause adverse health effects, including developmental effects to fetuses, testicular and kidney cancer, liver tissue damage, immune system or thyroid effects, and changes in cholesterol, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

It's unclear how much cleanup may be needed at the New Hampshire site to deal with the compounds. In other parts of the country, per- and polyfluorinated compound contamination has forced communities to switch from tap water to bottled water.

"This landfill happens to be, like many landfills, not in a very isolated place, but not far from residential homes," Alex Dunn, EPA's Region 1 administrator, said at the Association for Environmental Health and Sciences Foundation's annual East Coast conference, Oct. 15 in Amherst, Mass.

Dunn, who confirmed the Coakley landfill is leaching the compounds, said it's possible that other closed landfills could be reopened to check if they are also a source.

Finding the Source

The cap on the landfill at the Coakley site, and the system conveying its runoff to stormwater ponds, were built in the 1990s, according to one of the contractors working at the site, CES, Inc. The contractor's spring 2018 stormwater samples suggest that rainwater is coming into contact with materials that contain per- and polyfluorinated compounds, and carrying the compounds toward the ponds.

The same type of materials that make up the landfill's cap and piping, low-density and high-density polyethylene, tested positive for poly- or perfluorinated compounds in some lab tests, but not all, James Occhialini, vice president at Alpha Analytical in Westborough, Mass., said at the conference.

"We're not really sure about this," he said.

In New Hampshire alone, there are about 150 landfills with no lining separating the waste from the soil and groundwater underneath, New Hampshire State Rep. Mindi Messmer told Bloomberg Environment in August, when CES announced the results of its preliminary sampling. The contractor is working to confirm its findings.

Messmer was skeptical that the landfill's cap could be the source of the contamination.

"I find it hard to believe that the cap material, 25 years later, could be causing these kinds of levels," Messmer said.

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